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## A Musical Italy: Michael W. Balfe's Italian Experiences

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### *Abstract:*

The Dublin-born musician, Michael W. Balfe, was a singer, composer and conductor whose brilliant musical career was heavily influenced by formative experiences in Italy. In 1825, Balfe, interested in broadening his musical studies first went to Paris where he was introduced to the great composers, Luigi Cherubini and Gioachino Rossini, who took a personal interest in him and his musical talents. On the advice of Rossini he spent the next few years in Italy studying singing with the famous Rossini singer, Filippo Galli, and taking music composition lessons from Ferdinando Paer, in Rome. Later in Milan he studied harmony and counterpoint with Vincenzo Federici. By 1831, when he was only 23 years old, his first three operas had been produced in Palermo, Pavia, and Milan. He returned to London in August 1835, participating with the great Lablache, Tamburini, Rubini and Grisi in a concert in Vauxhall Gardens. In 1834 he made his debut at La Scala, Milan, singing opposite the renowned mezzo-soprano, Maria Malibran in Rossini's *Otello*. He appeared again with Malibran in Venice early in 1835, singing once more in Rossini and Bellini operas. Balfe worked as a singer and composer throughout the Italian peninsula/states during the years, 1825-1835 and this article will chart these experiences and demonstrate how the time he spent in Italy and the people he met, influenced his life and later career as an important and popular European composer.

*Keywords:* Composer, Ireland, Italy, Music, Opera

The nineteenth-century Dublin-born composer and singer Michael William Balfe (1808-1870), best remembered today as the composer of *The Bohemian Girl* (1843), spent about eight years learning his craft in Italy. Balfe's

<sup>1</sup> *Editors' Note:* Basil Walsh, who had originally agreed to contribute to this issue of *Studi irlandesi*, died on 21st November 2014. This article is taken from chapters 2 and 3 of Basil Walsh's book *Michael Balfe: A Unique Victorian Composer* (Irish Academic Press 2008). The material is reproduced here with permission from Irish Academic Press.

experience and activities on the peninsula from around 1825 played a significant part in defining his long career. This article will chart these experiences and demonstrate how the time he spent in Italy and the people he met, influenced his life and later career as an important and popular European performer and composer. Indeed, by the time the twenty-seven-year-old Balfe emerged as a successful writer of operas in London in the mid-1830s, he had already come in personal contact with composers such as Rossini, Bellini, Cherubini, and probably Donizetti, and sung in a number of their operas as well. Later he also had contact with Verdi. Over the years, he sang or established strong personal ties with several of the greatest singers of all time, including Giuditta Pasta, Maria Malibran, Giulia Grisi, Giovanni Battista Rubini, Mario, Antonio Tamburini, Pauline Viardot, Jenny Lind, Giorgio Ronconi, Domenico Donzelli, Henriette Sontag, and Luigi Lablache. Balfe wrote twenty-eight operas for London, Paris, Milan, and Trieste. He also composed some 250 songs to poems by Longfellow, Tennyson, Moore, and various Italian poets. His other compositions include several cantatas, a symphony, and vocal scenes and arias, some of which were interpolated into other composers' works. In 1846 Benjamin Lumley, the manager of Her Majesty's Theatre in London, appointed Balfe musical director of the Italian Opera, a position he held until 1852. During that time he conducted several British premieres, including those of Verdi's *Nabucco*, *Attila*, and *I due Foscari*. In 1847, when Verdi departed London for Paris after conducting superstars Lind and Lablache in the premiere of *I masnadieri*, it was Michael Balfe who took over the podium and completed the run.

### *1. Music in Italy in the 1820s and 1830s*

The Italy of this period was vastly different from the unified country we know today and the country was divided into a series of states and regions. Anyone endeavouring to pursue their chosen profession as a musician or singer had to move between various political regions, in order to participate in the opera seasons and earn an income. For a singer to move from one region to another, it was necessary to have documentation and also a passport. The northern Italian circuit for opera during these years saw many small towns, such as Cremona, Pavia, Vicenza and Varese, involved in presenting opera. Towns with larger populations like Parma, Bergamo, Verona and Genoa were in the second tier and they usually had longer seasons because of their socio-economic structure. Genoa later became more important. The cities of Milan and Venice, and to a somewhat lesser degree Turin, were the top tier. Further south Florence and Naples also qualified.

Sometime singers who performed at La Scala Milan or in Venice were invited to sing at the Italian opera in Vienna which brought with it higher fees and great prestige and frequently a Habsburg, Royal audience. The Director

at La Scala also managed the Italian opera in Vienna along with others. The performances throughout northern Italy were generally controlled by a string of impresarios who had a network of arrangements through which the singers passed in order to gain a singing contract. Depending upon the location sometimes it was princes who controlled orchestras and the theatres, which added to the confusion. Some of the more important impresarios of the time, such as Alessandro Lanari (1790-1862), who started his career in the small town of Lucca in 1819 and later managed the Teatro Pergola in Florence and the Teatro La Fenice in Venice, were continually on the verge of bankruptcy, which meant singers did not always get paid on time; the chorus sometimes not at all. Another important impresario, Bartolomeo Merelli (1794-1879), who managed La Scala intermittently from 1829 to 1850 and later, was not above selling his singer contracts to one of his competitors if he thought he could make money on the deal. Merelli's La Scala also included a gambling operation in the theatre. A singer's contract generally held more leverage for the impresario than for the singer. If a singer violated their contract such as showing up late for a season or declaring illness they were liable to find themselves in court or perhaps in jail. The system was also fraught with favours. Regardless of contractual obligations, roles were often promised and dished-out based on personal favours. Those who objected found it difficult to get new roles due to the impresario communications network. Frequently *prima donnas* were accompanied by their mothers or another family member as part of their protection.

The business of singing almost anywhere in Italy during the early years of the nineteenth century was certainly precarious at best, particularly at the secondary levels where the economics were forever unstable. Similar situations prevailed for operatic composers. The history of battles between Verdi and Merelli, which happened later, are legion. At one point Verdi refused to have any of his operas produced at La Scala. Bellini and Donizetti had the same problems at various theatres. So for Balfe, it would have been a difficult experience trying to earn a living. Being married (in 1831 to soprano Lina Roser) possibly initially brought some level of stability to his earnings since if he was not employed at least his wife could be working. However, it is also important to remember that the years Balfe was in Italy, were some of the most productive times in terms of the major new works being introduced by Bellini, Donizetti, Pacini, Ricci and others. This was an enormously valuable learning experience for the twenty-two-year-old future composer as he continued to sing in the works of these composers while learning his craft.

## *2. Balfe's Career in Italy*

In 1825, the promising young Irish musician Balfe, interested in broadening his musical studies first went to Paris where he was introduced to the

great composers, Luigi Cherubini and Gioachino Rossini, who took a personal interest in him and his musical talents. Luigi Cherubini, the elderly Italian composer, was then the director of the Paris Conservatoire, a position he held from 1821 until 1841. He took an immediate liking to the young student and was impressed by his musical talents. He talked to the youth about study and the opportunities in Paris for a musician, offering Balfe 'gratuitous instruction' if he remained in Paris (*The Musical World* 29 March 1856, 197). However, Balfe was not diverted from his desire to go to Italy, advising Cherubini that he would return to Paris if things did not work out in Italy.

Sometime later in 1825, probably in the spring, the young musician and his patron (Count Mazzara) reached Milan where they spent some time. Balfe was invited to participate in a private concert in the home of Giovanni Ricordi (1785-1853), the music publisher who frequently arranged such events. Other singers included the noted French tenor, Gilbert Duprez (1806-1896), and another French tenor, Alexis Dupont (1796-1874), both on their way back to Paris. Some years later, Balfe was destined to compose a remarkable cantata for these two singers and others, while in Paris. Most important perhaps is the fact that Balfe's entry into Italy started in esteemed company, which says something for his talents and personal style.

While in Milan, Balfe and his patron also visited the opera: Rossini's *Semiramide*, *Mosè in Egitto*, *La Cenerentola* and *Tancredi* were being performed at La Scala. These were operas that Balfe would become very familiar with in the future. Afterwards they departed for Rome. The year 1825 was a Holy Year in Rome; as a result all of the theatres were closed, which would have been a disappointment for Balfe as it was for Donizetti (Ashbrook 1982, 33). How much time Balfe spent during 1825 languishing in Rome is not really known. Whether he took music lessons or singing lessons or participated in any concerts is also not really known as no direct documentation has been found that might provide an insight into his activities during this period. However, by early 1826 his patron deemed it desirable that his young guest should consider moving to Milan for study, where there were experienced instructors and more opportunities to participate in concerts. Milan also had several opera houses. The patron needed to travel to England on business and on the way he offered to take Balfe with him to Milan and to make arrangements for him to study there. It seems he also provided the young musician with an initial stipend to enable him to get established in the northern Italian city.

In Milan, Balfe worked with Vincenzo Federici (1764-1826) through the summer of 1826. While Federici was associated with the Milan Conservatory, Balfe actually took lessons with him privately, probably because Balfe would have been over age for the institution. This was the same Conservatory that refused to admit the young Giuseppe Verdi a few years later because they considered him too old, at the age of eighteen. In any event, Balfe continued

his tuition in counterpoint and harmony with the aging Federici. The music teacher later died in Milan in August 1826 so Balfe was left to continue his studies with his singing teacher, Filippo Galli (1783-1853) as his sole instructor. It was also around this time that Balfe decided to branch out. He made contact with various theatre managers in the area to see if there were opportunities for him as a composer or singer or possibly as a copyist for orchestral scores. During the early nineteenth century, orchestral scores were not printed. Most theatres had copyists on staff or access to outside copyists for the purpose of creating the orchestral parts from a composer's autograph score.

There were several theatres functioning in Milan at the time, including the Teatro Carcano, Teatro della Cannobiana, Teatro Re, Teatro Santa Radegonda and several other smaller places, all of which presented opera in addition to the city's principal venue, La Scala. During this time period Balfe also made contact with the London-born Joseph Glossop (1793-1850), the son of a wealthy London merchant and property owner. Glossop in his youth had established the Royal Coburg Theatre in London, which went into bankruptcy around 1822, forcing Glossop to depart London. To avoid his creditors Glossop took off for the continent to try his success there. When Balfe arrived in Milan, Glossop in fact was in charge of the Royal Theatres of Milan with an appointment from August 1824 to May 1826. Through a somewhat audacious application to the ruling Austrian authority (Austria ruled Lombardy and Venetia at the time), Glossop gained control of La Scala, and the Teatro della Cannobiana and other Milan theatres in August 1824, having already been appointed lessee at the San Carlo in Naples earlier that same year<sup>2</sup>.

In 1826, Balfe was finally successful in gaining an assignment to compose a ballet, titled *Il naufragio di La Pérouse*. This was gained through his relationship with Glossop. However, Glossop had concerns about a composer who was British and whose name was unknown. As a result, he assigned the work to one of his secondary theatres, the Teatro della Cannobiana, not to La Scala. The sets and scenery were designed by an Englishman by the name of Barrymore. It was reported that the work was quite successful (*The*

<sup>2</sup> Glossop was a man of the theatre, as were his sons. He was first married in 1812 to the English soprano Elizabeth Férron (1797-1853). She established herself as an important singer and she was in fact singing at La Scala during this period also. In turn one of their sons, Augustus Harris Glossop (1825-1873), who was born in Naples, became a London impresario, and his son Sir Augustus Harris (1852-1896) became, perhaps, the most famous family member as the lessee of Drury Lane and Covent Garden Theatres in London, where he managed some of the greatest singers of the late nineteenth century. Glossop senior married a second time in 1827, this time to Josephine de Méric, another singer, who would also get to know Balfe at a later date through members of her family. Joseph Glossop died in Italy in 1853 and is buried in Florence. Balfe was destined to come in contact with various Harris Glossop family members again later in his life in London, in a different capacity. See Cheke 1993, 43-54.

*Musical World*, 12 April 1856, 229). How many performances it may have had, is not known. The music has not survived and there does not appear to be any documentary information or reviews available. The Cannobiana being a secondary theatre in Milan, it would not always have had musical critics in attendance.

With Glossop gone from Milan in 1826 and no real opportunities, Balfe became somewhat despondent with his limited progress and the fact that he was most probably short on money. Additionally, he continued to struggle with his thoughts of becoming a singer versus a composer; trying to work both sides of the street created a conflict. Balfe made up his mind to return to London, where he had contacts and the opportunity to gain an income. There is a reference to him in *The Harmonicon* as having performed at a private concert in London around this time<sup>3</sup>. Remembering Cherubini's kind words he decided to visit Paris on the return trip early in 1827. Once there, he immediately contacted the aging Italian composer Cherubini to seek his advice and help. Cherubini was sympathetic to the young musician. He invited Balfe to dinner where his guests were Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868) and his wife of five years, the successful singer Isabella Colbran (1785-1845) and some other people. As the evening progressed, Rossini in his inimitable style suggested some music and singing. Balfe was invited to display his talents. The young Irishman, with great flair, accompanied himself on the piano in a recital of Figaro's aria "Largo al factotum" from Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, to the amazement of all present, most of all the composer himself. Rossini's response was quite complimentary (*The Harmonicon*, January 1831, 49). Balfe was about to turn nineteen years old at the time. Rossini was so impressed with the erudite Balfe's performance that he committed to helping him, at the same time promising him that he would eventually perform at the Théâtre-Italiens, the premier Italian opera house in France. Another guest at Cherubini's dinner party, a banker, agreed to underwrite the cost of Balfe's vocal lessons with the well established singer and coach, Giulio Bordogni (1789-1856). For the next year Balfe studied both with Cherubini and Bordogni, applying himself with great zeal according to reports.

Balfe's baritone voice had matured by now: he had a two-octave range, with significant flexibility, that was suited to Rossini's music style. He was also an excellent sight-reader of music, a talent rare among singers of that period. Balfe's operatic debut occurred at the Théâtre-Italiens in January 1828 in the role of Figaro in nine performances of *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. The Rosina of the cast was none other than the celebrated Henriette Sontag (1806-1854), Giulio

<sup>3</sup> See *The Harmonicon*, January 1831, in which there is a reference that "About three years ago he [Balfe] returned for a short time to London, and we heard him in private sing a cavatina of his own composition" (49).

Bordogni (Balfe's teacher), was the Almaviva, with Nicholas Levasseur (1791-1871) as Don Basilio. By all accounts, it was a very successful debut. Following the fourth performance, Rossini advised Balfe that he would be receiving a three year-commitment from the opera's management, which was welcomed by the somewhat amazed Balfe (*The Musical World*, 12 April 1856, 229).

Over the next several months Balfe added the part of Dandini in *La Cenerentola* by Rossini, with the renowned Maria Malibran (1808-1836) in the title role. Domenico Donzelli (1790-1873) sang the tenor role of the Prince. Balfe's next portrayal was that of Don Giovanni in Mozart's opera of the same name. He later sang in Rossini's *La gazza ladra* in the part of the Podestà with Malibran and the short comic role of Batone in *L'inganno felice*, which finished up a very successful season for him. This relationship with Malibran would be extremely valuable to Balfe in the future and the two would become close friends.

Towards the end of the season in Paris the theatre management decided to mount a production of Nicolò Zingarelli's (1752-1837) opera *Romeo e Giulietta* with Malibran in the part of Romeo. Malibran in her capricious style was not completely happy with some of Zingarelli's music. She requested Rossini to make some adjustments so that the music was more suitable for her vocal style. Rossini declined but recommended that Balfe be considered (*The Musical World*, 12 April 1856, 229). Balfe jumped at the opportunity to compose music for Malibran and interpolate it into Zingarelli's score. And so his first musical effort included composing an overture, two choruses and a special scene for Malibran and an aria for the secondary role of the soprano. This was virtually a restructuring of the opera. However, Malibran was more than satisfied as was the theatre management, to the extent that they offered Balfe a libretto for him to compose a new opera, with the title of *Atala*.

As it turned out, Balfe only composed selective pieces for the opera, electing instead to return to Italy to gain more experience as a singer and possibly a composer. Before his departure there was a concert performed in which some of his musical pieces were performed. His friend Malibran participated, as did tenor Alexis Dupont, whom he had met earlier in Milan. The great tenor Adolph Nourrit (1802-1839), who would go on to create the role of Arnold in Rossini's crowning achievement, *Guillaume Tell* in Paris a year later, was also on the programme (*ibidem*). On 16 August 1828, apparently Rossini and his wife were scheduled to participate in a concert at the Hôtel de Ville in Dieppe. Rossini brought Balfe along. The concert was for the Duchess du Berry. What they performed is not known. Obviously the relationship between the young Irishman and the famous Italian composer was excellent. On his return to Paris Balfe prepared himself for his journey to Italy and for what would be the start of the next stage of his career.

How Balfe got to Italy this time has been the subject of much speculation. After leaving Paris he did not have much money after paying his debts,

even though he had good earnings as a singer for several months. However, ever optimistic, he decided to return to Milan as quickly as possible given his new credentials from the Théâtre-Italiens. Rossini had also provided a letter of introduction for him to various people in Italy. Balfe arrived in Milan in December 1828, where he most probably contacted the music publisher Giovanni Ricordi, whose business was now flourishing, or possibly an ex-Ricordi employee, Francesco Lucca (1802-1872), who had started his own music publishing business in Milan in 1825. Lucca would publish some of Balfe's works in the years ahead. Possibly because of his prior contact with Ricordi or maybe through his letter from Rossini he managed to gain a position in a concert being sponsored by the Garden Society of Milan on 7 December 1828 in which the featured singer was the great soprano, Giuditta Pasta (1797-1865) who was then only thirty-one years old and about to create major new roles in Milan for Bellini and Donizetti within a few years. Also sharing the concert platform along with Balfe was the tenor Berardo Winter and a mezzo-soprano, Marietta Tonelli (Appolonia 2000, 302).

The concerts consisted of excerpts from Giacomo Meyerbeer's (1791-1864) *Il crociato in Egitto*, Rossini's *Tancredi*, Giovanni Paisiello's (1740-1816) *Nini* and Francesco Morlacchi's (1784-1841) *Tebaldo e Isolina* which were performed by the singers. Balfe had not sung any of this music previously. However, given his ability to sight-read and being a quick learner, no doubt he performed well. He would meet with Pasta again many years in the future in London when she would perform together with Balfe in a very different role.

During this time, the composer Vincenzo Bellini (1802-1835) was also in Milan finalizing his new opera, *La straniera*, which had originally been scheduled to premiere at La Scala for the opening of Carnival on 26 December, but because of illness on the part of his librettist was delayed until 14 February 1829. Balfe met Bellini during his stay in Milan more than likely introduced by Pasta (Biddlecombe 1994, 127)<sup>4</sup>. While in Milan he presented the Rossini letter to the Conte di Sant'Antonio (later Duke of Cannizzaro) and as a result an assignment was secured for him in Palermo at the Teatro Carolino for the spring/summer period 1829 (*ibidem*).

After leaving Milan, Balfe made his way to Bologna to visit one of Rossini's wealthy musician friends, the Marchese Francesco Giovanni Sampieri, whom he had met in Paris. During his stay in Bologna Balfe was introduced to the future great soprano, Giulia Grisi (1811-1869). The two were initially attracted to each other and she and Balfe were destined to become lifelong

<sup>4</sup> Bellini was later to convey his good wishes to Balfe through a friend (Andrea Monteleone in Palermo) when the baritone was about to sing in the local premiere of Bellini's new opera, *La straniera* in Palermo (letter from Bellini to his friend Monteleone dated 17 September 1829 that mentions Balfe by name). See Biddlecombe 1994, 127.



friends. The Marchese as a patron of the arts hosted various evenings and events for his friends. In the early months of 1829, Balfe and Giulia Grisi sang together at concerts. During the Lenten season, the Società del Casino sponsored Rossini's *Mosè*, which was performed on 17 March with the eighteen-year-old Giulia Grisi in the role of Sinaide and Balfe as Farone<sup>5</sup>. Balfe also sang one of his favorite arias, Figaro's "Largo al factotum", at one of the concerts, much to the delight of Grisi. Shortly afterwards Balfe composed a cantata quartette (32 pages) for Grisi, the tenor Francesco Pedrazzi (1802-1850?), and the composer and bass, Giuseppe Tadolini (1789-1872) and one other voice. Pedrazzi was later to create leading roles in several operas at La Scala and elsewhere. Tadolini was a composer, vocal teacher, the husband of the soprano of the same name and a friend of Rossini's.

In Bologna Balfe also composed his first and only Sinfonia (88 pages), which was completed on 31 March, 1829, in honour of his host's birthday. It was probably performed by what would have been a small orchestra in the service of the Marchese. The complete autograph score of the cantata and the Sinfonia autograph score are both held by the library of the Accademia Filarmonica in Bologna, under the name Guglielmo Balfe. The Marchese was so impressed by his young guest that he arranged for Balfe to be offered a lifetime honorary membership in the Società Filarmonica di Bologna. It was interesting to see that Balfe is described as being "from Dublin", not London, and aged twenty in the official document dated 20 March 1829 that was submitted for his appointment. The long formal document making his appointment official also included some other recommended applicants and was dated 14 April 1829 in the signature section. At the top it was dated 27 March 1829. Apparently the document had to wait until the next meeting of the members before it became official. In the document Balfe is described as "Michele Guglielmo Balf, di Dublino" with the 'e' missing from his name. The document was signed by nine members of the Academy.

Shortly afterwards Balfe left for Palermo, where he was engaged to make his Italian operatic debut. Giulia Grisi left for Florence, where she would sign a contract with the impresario, Alessandro Lanari, as a *prima donna assoluta*. She and Balfe were destined to meet each other and perform together many times in the years ahead. Grisi had a remarkable career in London, Dublin, Paris and St. Petersburg. She became one of the most important singers of the nineteenth century.

There seems to be some confusion among his biographers as to when Balfe actually arrived in Palermo. However, new evidence suggests that Balfe probably left Bologna in April and arrived in Palermo by the second week of

<sup>5</sup> E-mail communication from Philip Gossett to the author, dated 9 December 2001.

May 1829<sup>6</sup>. Most probably he made his way first to Genoa or possibly to Naples and from either one then took a boat to Palermo. On arrival in Palermo he joined the season at the Teatro Carolino. His debut there took place on 30 May 1829 in Bellini's opera *Bianca e Gerlando*. This was followed by Donizetti's *Lajo nell'imbarazzo*. It was during this time that the chorus threatened to go on strike either for increased pay or more likely for back pay. The administrator, Count di Sommatino, decided to mount an opera that didn't need a chorus; however, he didn't have the scores for a Cimarosa or a Rossini opera that did not require a chorus. It was then that the ever-resourceful Balfe stepped into the breach, suggesting that he could write an opera in the time allotted, probably flaunting his newly acquired credentials from Bologna. Sommatino was able to provide a libretto based on a French vaudeville play by Antonio Alcozer, a librettist who was to later revise one of Donizetti's operas, and so Balfe got to work immediately on creating an opera minus a chorus. The libretto for *Il rivale di se stesso* (44 pages), states that it is a "Melo-Dramma Comico per Musica". It is a two-act opera with eight scenes.

By the time Balfe had composed the opera, the newly published libretto mentioned that the music was specially written by Signor Maestro Guglielmo Balfe, of the Accademia Filarmonica di Bologna and honorary member of the Accademia di Palermo. So Balfe must have established his credentials almost immediately to have been appointed as a member of the Academy in Palermo on such short notice. Possibly his letter from Rossini created the opportunity. His new work which premiered on 29 June 1829 at the Teatro Carolino was a success since it was repeated a number of times<sup>7</sup>.

Balfe did not sing in it immediately, however it appears that he may have taken over the baritone part of Durmont in one or more of the later performances. It had a strong cast; some of the singers had previously created leading roles in Rossini and Donizetti operas. The London *Harmonicon* newspaper, which had representatives throughout Europe reporting on local musical events, now featured a report on Balfe's exploits in far-off Palermo. The *Harmonicon* representative said: "Teatro Carolino; At this theatre an opera, by the bass [the baritone voice during that period was generally known as a bass voice in Italy] singer Guglielmo Balfe, was given some months ago, of which the Bolognese Journal says that 'The opera by Signor Balfe is now beginning to please; and a new production by this professor may be shortly expected.' Other journals speak differently of this work, not even dignifying it with the title of opera.

<sup>6</sup> The libretto for Balfe's first opera *Il rivale di se stesso* which was composed for Palermo, has a printed date of 29 June 1829 on its cover, which means that Balfe most probably arrived in Palermo around May 1829 or earlier and not in December 1828 as suggested by some of his earlier biographers.

<sup>7</sup> *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* needs to be corrected as the opera actually had its premiere in 1829 not 1830, based on the date printed on the libretto. See s.v. Sadie 1992.

Be the merits of Balfe as a composer great or small, his vocal talent is unquestioned, and gave great delight in a piece composed by Maestro e Direttore La Manna, [Director and orchestra leader] which was introduced among many other pieces in Rossini's *Bianca e Falliero*" (July 1829).

Unfortunately the music for this first Balfe opera is lost. However, clearly this was an opera, not a musical play. The singers who performed it all had good operatic careers in major opera houses afterwards. It seems that after this effort the chorus acquiesced and meekly went back to work as the season continued. Balfe sang in several more operas and his new opera was performed again in September and early in the New Year. On New Year's Day 1830 he took on the principal baritone roles in the local premiere of Bellini's new opera *La straniera*. The evening included a state visit by the Viceroy. Balfe's performance was loudly applauded, once the Viceroy indicated approval, particularly the second act aria, "Meco tu vieni, o misera". The native Sicilian composer's opera was of course a great success, with the opera being performed for seventy nights<sup>8</sup>.

As the season at Palermo wound down Balfe returned to the mainland, feeling confident and with some money in his pocket. He continued to build his career; however, he was still not sure of his overall direction. He was having some success at singing and new opportunities were beginning to open up for him. His first experience with composing an opera had been exciting and it too provided new scope and opportunities.

Meanwhile, continuing to use the name 'Guglielmo' Balfe, he had made contact with the Teatro Comunale in Piacenza and had reached an agreement with the management to perform there, during the latter part of the summer season in 1830. He agreed to sing in five operas, as follows: *Matilde di Shabran*, *La gazza ladra*, *Semiramide* and *Demetrio e Polibio*, all by Rossini, and the spectacular *Gli Arabi nelle Gallie* by Giovanni Pacini. The *Harmonicon* (London) reported on his progress in Piacenza, saying: "Two foreign artists, Mad.lle. Josephine Noël-Fabre, and an Englishman of the name of William Balfe, are great favourites here at present. The applause which they obtained, was of a very flattering kind" (January 1831, 49). However, the report did not end there. There was an asterisk after Balfe's name to an extensive footnote that expanded considerably on Balfe's background, his talents and how he got to Italy, as follows: "This young man (an Irishman by the by), if all we have heard of him be true, is a real musical genius. After making a kind of debut some years ago, as a juvenile violin-player, at a theatrical benefit [London],

<sup>8</sup> *Harmonicon*, July 1830 reported on the performances of *La straniera*, saying that much applause was bestowed on Madame Fink, and Messrs. Boccaccini and Balfe: "The latter gentleman, whose name is spelt Balf and Balph, is an Englishman, very young, and possessed of a remarkably fine bass voice" (310).

we have heard that, led by his enthusiastic love of his art, he made his way to Italy on foot. In that country he met with patronage which enabled him to enter on a course of study; and his inclination, and a fine bass voice, led him to cultivate, especially, composition and singing... his voice was a bass voice of two octaves compass from F to F; and he possessed much energy of manner, and great flexibility of execution" (*ibidem*).

This contemporary report on Balfe is one of the earliest reports that provide information on his vocal capabilities and skills while in Italy during these years. The reference to Balfe getting to Italy "on foot" is also intriguing. A later report in the *Harmonicon* refers to his history as being somewhat romantic, reinforcing the fact that he had actually "walked [hitch-hiked?] to Italy" so that he might have an opportunity of hearing and imitating the great singers there. In any event, the *Harmonicon* was sufficiently interested in the young artist's career to continue to provide feedback on Balfe's progress in Italy during the next few years.

We next find him at the Teatro Sociale in the town of Varese, north of Milan (*Harmonicon*, December 1830, 522). Here he opened the newly decorated theatre in Filippo Celli's *La secchia rapita* which had moderate success. This opera and Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* continued to be performed over several weeks, after which Giovanni Pacini's (1796-1867) *Il barone di Dolsheim* was introduced. In general Balfe received good reviews except for the Bellini opera, in which he sang the tenor part of Tebaldo with disastrous results. This was a mistake he never repeated. With the season over, Balfe moved on to Milan where there was exciting new operatic activity. The Carnival season that year at Teatro Carcano in Milan had been organized by a group of dilettanti who were upset at the way La Scala was being run. In the process they offered leading composers such as Donizetti and Bellini special terms to write new operas for their theatre, as a counter to La Scala's management (Ashbrook 1982, 62-63).

Donizetti came to Milan early in October to finalize arrangements with his librettist and the Teatro Carcano for what would be one of his masterpieces, his new opera *Anna Bolena* (Ashbrook 1982, 62-63). He also visited Bergamo to see his parents for the first time in nine years. His new opera was scheduled to premiere on the prestigious opening night of the Carnival season on 26 December 1830. The cast included Giuditta Pasta, tenor Giovanni Battista Rubini (1794-1854), Filippo Galli (1783-1853), and the mezzo Elisa Orlandi (1811-1834). The score of *Anna Bolena* was completed by Donizetti at Pasta's villa at Blevio on Lake Como by 10 December, after which he returned to Milan. Balfe, who was in Milan during this period, had more than a passing interest in Donizetti's new opera. He was on personal terms with Pasta, and Galli, who had been his vocal coach in Milan for almost a year. There is no doubt that given Balfe's precocious nature he would have somehow arranged to obtain a seat for one of the performances of the new opera, which was anx-

iously awaited by the elite of Milan. The Carnival season at Teatro Carcano that year also included someone that would have a major influence on Balfe's life, the young attractive soprano Lina Roser (1810-1888) who was to become Balfe's wife<sup>9</sup>. It is possible that they met through Pasta, who may have invited them to her villa at Blevio on Lake Como, where she frequently had guests. In February Lina Roser sang the leading soprano role in Luigi Majocchi's opera *Rosamonda* with tenor Giovanni Battista Rubini and baritone Paul Barroilhet (1810-1871). Balfe had a commitment to be in Pavia by April for the opera season. As part of his contract he also had to compose a new opera for the Teatro Condomini. During April he also sang in Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and *Mosè*. April was also spent finalizing his new opera, his second composition, *Un avvertimento ai gelosi*, a one-act comedy with sixteen scenes which was scheduled to premiere on 11 May 1831 with an experienced cast. Possibly Balfe may also have been the musical director of the orchestra.

The opera was an immediate success. The librettist Giuseppe Foppa (1760-1845) had provided librettos for Rossini, Paer, Zingarelli and others. Balfe, ever vigilant and restless, spent the next few months in the area, singing, working on some new compositions and looking for new opportunities that would give him income. Clearly Balfe was making good progress as a composer. His new opera was later performed in Milan with a distinguished cast. Early in June he was contracted to perform at the Teatro Riccardi in Bergamo, Donizetti's home town. The Bergamasc composer was in Naples at the time. Balfe was scheduled to sing in Pacini's remarkable opera, *Gli Arabi nelle Gallie*. His partners were the young soprano Lina Roser, the renowned tenor Giovanni David (1790-1864) and the bass, Carlo Cambiaggio (1798-1880) who was also a librettist, a composer and eventually an impresario at the Teatro Carcano. There was also a concert on 29 September at the Accademia in Bergamo in which Balfe participated with Roser and David. Carlo Cambiaggio was well-connected in operatic circles and he became a good friend of Balfe's. They sang together in various performances over the next several years. Cambiaggio would also be helpful to Balfe in premiering the Irishman's next opera in Milan.

Balfe was awarded an honorary membership in the Accademia Filarmonica di Bergamo for his participation, giving him additional accreditation for his work and adding to the recognition he achieved in Bologna and

<sup>9</sup> Lina Roser had arrived in Milan circa 1829 from Berlin with her Viennese foster mother, Katharina Vogel. A copy of a document in the possession of the author written by one of Balfe's granddaughters states that Lina talked about studying in Milan with one of Mozart's sons, Karl Thomas Mozart (K.T. Mozart spent most of his adult life in Italy). It is possible that Lina only had music lessons from Mozart's son and not vocal lessons which would still leave open the question as to whom her vocal coach may have been. Micheroux's name was never mentioned in the document referred to above. Whether Micheroux was in Milan during this period is not known.

Palermo. Sometime between June and September 1831, Lina Roser and Michael Balfe were married. Meanwhile Balfe's new opera composed in Pavia was now being performed in Milan at the Teatro Re, with an excellent cast that included the future great Verdi baritone, Giorgio Ronconi (1810-1890), who would create Verdi's first great operatic success, *Nabucco* in March 1842, at La Scala, Milan. Immediately after the Bergamo season was over, Michael and Lina Balfe set off for Varese, where they both had a contract to sing in several operas. This was the start of what would be a thirty-nine year marriage and a strong partnership that would bring both of them to several of the most important capitals of Europe and beyond in pursuit of music.

In early November 1831 Balfe and his wife went west from the town of Varese near the lakes to the small town of Novara in the Piedmont region, a distance of maybe forty miles. They were a travelling troupe, as they were accompanied by some of the performers from Varese. The month of November was spent in Novara singing in two operas, Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* and Pacini's opera *Il falegname di Livonia*. This time Balfe sang the bass part of Capellio, in *Capuleti*, having learned his lesson the previous month. The reviews were satisfactory. The big event in Milan that season was the planned premiere of Bellini's new opera, *Norma*, which was to open at La Scala on 26 December with Giuditta Pasta in the title role, Giulia Grisi as Adalgisa, Domenico Donzelli in the role of Pollione, and Vincenzo Negrini (1807-1840) as Oroveso. However, Balfe had to be in Bergamo in December for rehearsals as he was scheduled to sing there in early January. Lina was engaged to open the season in Parma in a Bellini opera on 26 December. Their contractual obligations prevented them from being in Milan for the opening night of what would become one of the century's greatest operatic works. Years later when Balfe would conduct one of Europe's great *prima donnas* in the title role of *Norma* in London, his handling of the orchestra for Bellini's masterpiece was greatly acclaimed by the critics. He was singled out for his precision, knowledge of the work and his overall direction of the orchestra. No doubt his early experiences in Milan contributed to his achieving such praise.

Meanwhile, the now pregnant Lina Roser-Balfe was due in Parma for the Carnival season at the Teatro Ducale, where she would sing the role of Adelaide in Bellini's *La straniera* on opening night, 26 December 1831. There were twenty-five performances of this successful opera. This was followed by nine performances of Donizetti's *Alina, regina di Golconda*, a two-act opera buffa in which Lina sang the role of Alina. Her next performance was a premiere by Luigi Ricci, *Il nuovo Figaro*, on 15 February with the important tenor Francesco Pedrazzi in the cast<sup>10</sup>. Lina sang the part of Amalia, with

<sup>10</sup> Stagione lirica Carnevale 1831-1832 (Parma). The programme can be found at <<http://www.lacasadellamusica.it/cronologia/>> (05/2016).

some of the performances again shared with Margherita Rubini<sup>11</sup>. The opera ran for twenty-four nights, which tends to refute some of the reporting that said the opera was a failure<sup>12</sup>.

It was not unusual for singers in the nineteenth century to sing night after night, for four or five nights or even longer without a break. Towards the middle of the season, Lina had experienced some difficulties with the theatre management when they requested her to sing an unscheduled work, which did not suit her vocally or dramatically. She was also having some signs of exhaustion and had to bow out of some performances. While Lina did share her roles in Parma on a few occasions with the soprano Margherita Rubini, her schedule for a young woman now about four months pregnant still seems astounding by any standards. On the other hand, this is evidence that says that Lina's professional career was clearly on an upward trend. Later in life, when Lina was to occasionally sing in London or Paris, her professionalism was always greatly praised by the critics.

In December, Balfe had to part company with his wife for the first time since she was due at Parma by mid-December and he had to be in Bergamo a little later for rehearsals. It would have been too far and take too much time for him to travel with her to Parma before going to Bergamo. He was returning to sing at the Teatro Riccardi for several performances of *Il falegname di Livonia* during January 1832. It is possible that he also sang in other works during this period. Operatic management gave little attention to the needs or scheduling of two married singers working in the profession. They had to work out for themselves where and when they sang. Immediately following this activity, Balfe went to Parma to be with his pregnant wife in mid-February. However, before leaving Bergamo he had composed a cantata for one of his friends there. The short piece was for tenor and bass with a dedication that said "To Guglielmo Balfe's friend, Francesco Maria Zanchi". It is an autograph score and more like a Fanfare than a full cantata and it is dated Bergamo, February 1832.

When Lina's season at Parma was over they immediately left for Milan. From March to December 1832 Lina did not sing again. Their first child, Louisa Catherine Maria Balfe, was born probably in the Milan area between June and August 1832. The arrival of baby Louisa, however joyful for the couple, must also have brought some concerns for their economic welfare.

<sup>11</sup> See the report in the *Harmonicon* of August 1832, which says "... the new opera has experienced a most brilliant reception ... the principal singers, and Signora Roser [Balfe] in particular, exerted themselves with great effect" (186).

<sup>12</sup> The 1889 edition of *The Grove Dictionary of Opera* states, under "Luigi Ricci", that the opera failed, which appears to be incorrect. A 'failed opera' in Italy in the nineteenth century was generally pulled after the third night. Additionally, the opera was also performed at La Scala during the 1833 season. Pedrazzi also performed in it at that time.

Since their marriage Lina had been working regularly and while her pay would have been modest in those days, it was probably enough to support them, along with Balfe's irregular earnings, at that stage of their life. Whatever their circumstances they managed to survive until the start of the next Carnival season at the Teatro Carcano, Milan, which opened on 26 December 1832 with Lina in the role of Giulietta in Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* and mezzo-soprano Palmira Michel as Romeo. The tenor role of Tebaldo was performed by her partner from Novara, the role's creator, Lorenzo Bonfigli<sup>13</sup>. No doubt Balfe attended. Balfe's friend, the buffo bass Carlo Cambiaggio had now turned impresario. He was the manager at the Carcano, so Balfe was assured of getting work. The future certainly looked brighter. Almost immediately, Cambiaggio had Balfe singing in Rossini's *L'inganno felice* with Bonfigli. He then gave Balfe an assignment to write a new opera for his theatre. This was an opportunity that Balfe had been waiting for.

Balfe had worked on a libretto some time previously based on an early historical tale relating to Enrico IV in Lombardy. The libretto was possibly given to Balfe by one of the monks in the Oratory of San Carlo in Milan. The poet or author's name is not shown on the libretto, which indicates that the music for the work was written especially for the Oratory of San Carlo. No date was given. Additionally, Balfe's name is written on the libretto in handwriting that is clearly from the period<sup>14</sup>. The part that would become the female lead role and be sung by Lina Balfe at the later Carcano performance was written for a youth named 'Carlino'. The performance at the Oratory of San Carlo was probably sung by novices in the monastery as there was no female role in their libretto. In view of Balfe's activity in 1832 it may have been performed at the Oratory in 1831. The text for the libretto was appropriately adapted for the Teatro Carcano performance with the addition of the female role of Cristina. In general though, when the libretto for the Carcano performance is compared with the Oratory libretto they are essentially the same, except that the Oratory performance was given in two acts while the Carcano was in one act. How Balfe might have been involved with the Oratorio is unknown. Possibly Lina, who was a strong Catholic, may have had something to do with it. It's also possible that they had been married there and that would have been Balfe's way to pay for the ceremony? We don't know.

<sup>13</sup> *Harmonicon*, March 1833. "The Teatro Carcano opened with Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*, the part of Juliet by Madame Roser Balfe, Romeo by Mdlle. Michell, and Tebaldo (the tenor) by Bonfigli. Though this opera is far from being a novelty in Milan, it still retains a great share of popularity" (65). The opera had opened the previous season at La Scala with Bonfigli in the cast.

<sup>14</sup> I am indebted to Alexander Weatherson of the Donizetti Society (London) for bringing this to my attention and giving me a copy of the libretto of *Enrico IV al passo della Marna*, the Oratory of San Carlo work.



In any event, Balfe's opera *Enrico IV al passo della Marna* premiered with some fanfare at the Teatro Carcano on 13 February 1833 (not at La Scala as stated in one of the early biographies) with the tenor Bonfigli as Enrico IV, Balfe as Constantino, Lina as Cristina, the soprano lead, and Cambiaggio as Gervasio. The opera was quite successful. Balfe was featured in one of the leading Milan musical periodicals the following week with a very complimentary article that was about a column and a half in length<sup>15</sup>. The opera was performed again during the 1834-1835 season in Milan at the Teatro Carcano. Later there were other productions in Genoa at the Teatro Carlo Felice, also in Lecco and in the Turin area in the town of Bra. Florence possibly also heard it. Francesco Lucca of Milan published *Enrico IV* in 1832. This was a major step-up for Balfe from his previous publishers. It was also to be the last new opera Balfe composed in Italy for many years.

The Cambiaggio connection paid off even more for Balfe. The impresario had decided to mount a production of Donizetti's delightfully sparkling new opera, *L'elisir d'amore* with Cambiaggio himself in the role of the quack, Dr Dulcamara, and Balfe as the braggadocio sergeant Belcore for 25 March 1833<sup>16</sup>. This was only eight months after the opera's premiere at the Teatro della Canobbiana in Milan in May 1832. There can be little doubt that this was a role ideally suited to Balfe's talents. The swaggering sergeant Belcore would have been beautifully presented by the Irishman. Balfe sang in two other operas, with Lina joining him in the opera *Elisa di Montaltieri* by Antonio Granara (1809-1836), along with Bonfigli at the Carcano before his season ended. He would meet again with his friend Carlo Cambiaggio the following year in Venice.

Despite his recent success as a composer, his focus was now on singing. Strangely, as will be seen, it was a time when he appeared to receive fewer engagements not more, while Lina's career was taking off at a rapid pace. Over the next several months Lina sang leading roles in a number of operas by Donizetti, Bellini, Mercadante and others. In Piacenza she sang with baritone Giorgio Ronconi (1810-1890) in *La straniera* and again with Ronconi in Mercadante's *I Normanni a Parigi*<sup>17</sup>. There were also reports that Balfe had gone on a tour with the horn player, Giovanni Puzzi who would later become one of Balfe's close friends in London along with Puzzi's wife, Giacinta. However, no documentary evidence has been found to support the fact that Balfe was travelling anywhere during this timeframe. Perhaps he helped his wife with learning the many new roles she was taking on?

<sup>15</sup> See the periodical *Il barbiere di Siviglia, Giornale di Musica, Teatri e Varietà*, 21 February 1833, 8, 1.

<sup>16</sup> Information provided by Giorgio Appolonia of Varese, Italy.

<sup>17</sup> *Donizetti Society Journal* 5 (1984), article on a chronology of Giorgio Ronconi performances by Thomas G. Kaufman. See p. 183.

Their next joint appearance was at the Carnival season opening on 26 December 1833 in Mantua. Here Lina sang in Bellini's *La straniera* in the role of Alaide, a role she was quite familiar with. She later appeared in Ricci's *Chiara di Rosenberg* with her husband, after which she sang the title role in *Norma* with Teresa Brambilla as Adalgisa. Returning to Milan in the spring of 1834 she appeared at the Teatro della Canobbiana for the first time in *L'orfano della selva* by Carlo Coccia (1782-1873). This was followed by *Un episodio del San Michele* by Cesare Pugni (1802-1870), which had its premiere in June 1834 with Lina in the cast. She continued to push herself and sing wherever she could get work.

Balfe's friend from Paris, Maria Malibran, arrived in Milan in the spring of 1834. She was scheduled to make her debut at La Scala in Bellini's *Norma*. She didn't know it then, but Giuditta Pasta, the role's creator, would be in the audience for her debut. Malibran and Balfe were the same age, twenty-six and by now Malibran had the equivalent status of a Maria Callas in the 1950s. In his immediate future Balfe and Maria were about to sing together at La Scala, where her influence had prevailed upon the management to hire Balfe to sing opposite her in Rossini's *Otello* in May 1834. He would later compose an opera for Maria which she would sing in London. For Balfe, performing at La Scala had been an ambition since he first talked with Glossop a few years previously. They gave two performances of *Otello*, Balfe sang the role of Jago, which had originally been composed for tenor voice in 1816, but by its nature the role required a darker heavier voice and by tradition in the nineteenth century it was frequently transposed for a baritone. Maria sang Desdemona and Domenico Reina (1797-1843) sang the title role. Giuseppina (Josefa) Ruiz-Garcia, Malibran's half-sister<sup>18</sup>, sang the role of Rodrigo, which was normally sung by a tenor. The performances went well and Malibran was invited back with the same cast the following October.

After La Scala, Balfe and his wife went to Turin, where Lina was engaged to sing in three operas during the summer and autumn. All of the operas were local premieres. Malibran stayed on in Milan for about a month before going to Sinigaglia, where she was to sing in Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*, *Norma* and *La sonnambula* in July. In Turin Lina was paired again with the baritone Giorgio Ronconi at the Teatro Carignano in Cesare Pugni's (1802-1870) *Il disertore svizzero*, Ferdinand Hérold's (1791-1833) *Zampa* and Donizetti's *Parisina*. The tenor in the performances was Giovanni Bassadonna (1806?-1851), who created roles for Donizetti and others. Lina's career continued to be on the fast track. When Ronconi left Turin Balfe took over his part of Daniele in *Zampa*.

<sup>18</sup> Josefa Ruiz-Garcia was the daughter of Manuel Garcia and his first wife, Manuela Moralez.

On 23 September Balfe wrote a personal letter in Italian to Giovanni Ricordi, the music publisher in Milan, detailing the performances in Turin mentioning the dramatic content of the opera *Zampa* and saying among other things that “Ronconi and my wife received great applause in Hérold’s opera”<sup>19</sup>. The tone of the letter indicated that he had a good relationship with the founder of the music publishing empire, who was now one of Milan’s most important citizens. Balfe signed the letter, “tuo amico G. Balfe”. It was also indicative of Balfe’s learning skills that by now he was not only speaking Italian but also able to write it. He and Lina returned to Milan in early October where Malibran was already performing at La Scala in various Bellini operas. On 14 October Malibran and Balfe again sang in Rossini’s *Otello* for two performances.

By now the Balfes’ daughter, Louisa, was two years old and probably requiring more attention. The parents took some time off in Milan before proceeding to Lina’s next engagement, which would be at the Teatro Emeronittio (now the Malibran) at year end in Venice, where Lina was due to open in Donizetti’s *L’elisir d’amore* on 31 December 1834 in the role of Adina. Carlo Cambiaggio was scheduled to sing Dr. Dulcamara again and another future great Verdi baritone (*Rigoletto*, 1851, and *La traviata*, 1853, creator) Felice Varesi (1813-1889), was slated for the role of Belcore. The Nemorino was Filippo Tati, a role creator for Donizetti. Another Donizetti work followed, *Torquato Tasso*, an opera which had premiered a year earlier in Rome with the same cast. Lina sang the role of Eleonora and there were about ten performances.

Maria Malibran made her entrance into Venice in advance of her performances in that city which had anticipated her arrival for weeks. Carlo Cambiaggio, ever the promoter and opportunist had written a booklet with verse to celebrate her arrival. Venice basically closed down at the moment of her arrival at the Grand Canal and her entrance from a gondola on to St. Mark’s Square, where she and her party were escorted to the Palace where she was staying. She made her debut in Rossini’s *Otello* on 26 March. Balfe did not sing the role of Jago in Venice but performed Elmiro, a bass role, instead. There were three *Otellos*. Rossini’s *Cenerentola* followed with Balfe as Dandini after which *Norma* was scheduled. Lina joined Malibran in *Norma*, singing the role of Adalgisa in three performances. It was a remarkable culmination for Lina given all of the roles and places she had sung over the previous three years. While some of the audiences were critical of Malibran’s portrayal remembering Pasta’s of earlier times, it was a matter of personal taste, as Bellini was favourable to a Malibran interpretation. For Lina to be singing with Malibran in Bellini’s *Norma* at La Fenice no doubt was to be a high point in her career.

<sup>19</sup> *Editors’ note*: This letter was in the personal possession of Basil Walsh.

The manager of the Teatro Emeronittio, Gallo, was introduced to Malibran possibly by Cambiaggio, who seemed to know everyone. Gallo asked Malibran if she would consider giving performances for his theatre, which had been feeling the financial impact on seat sales with her presence and her sold-out performances at La Fenice. Malibran, who was always generous with her time, after a slight hesitation agreed to sing a benefit performance for him, choosing Bellini's *La sonnambula* as the opera. A date of 8 April was set for the performance at the Teatro Emeronittio. In addition, she offered one performance of *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, which would be sung at La Fenice with Gallo getting a percentage of the takings. Balfe was to be Figaro and Cambiaggio Dr Bartolo. Gallo's theatre was completely decorated with flowers for the one and only appearance by the great Maria Malibran on 8 April 1835 in *La sonnambula*. Balfe was set to sing the role of Count Rodolfo. The level of excitement was very intense by all reports. As the evening progressed the audience threw flowers at their *prima donna*, so much so that the entire stage was covered. Maria at one point slipped; Balfe grasped her and saved her from falling. In the process, her slipper became dislodged and fell off into the pit, where it immediately disappeared. The pianist Franz Liszt, in the audience that eventful night, counted thirty-six curtain calls<sup>20</sup>.

It was a night to remember for the Balfes, as no doubt Lina was in the audience or backstage too. Maria refused to take any money from Gallo for her performance that evening. Gallo, quite awed by the turn of events, renamed his theatre the 'Teatro Malibran' – a name that endures to this day<sup>21</sup>. While with Balfe in Venice, Maria, recalling his compositional skills from Paris and hearing about his accomplishments in Italy, had called him the 'English Rossini' and had suggested that he compose an opera for her for London. There was some discussion of Hamlet as a subject but nothing seemed to develop on that front. He agreed to contact her when he found a suitable subject and libretto. She suggested that he hurry.

Neither the Balfes nor Malibran would ever sing in Venice again. The experience of that eventful evening at the Teatro Malibran was unique in their lives. Malibran left for London shortly after this, to perform *La sonnambula* again, this time in English, with Bellini in the audience. Balfe and his wife returned to Milan around the middle of April, and there they met Giovanni Puzzi, who was organizing some concerts in London. With Louisa now going on three Balfe and his wife must have had thought about their future and

<sup>20</sup> For a detailed account of Malibran's appearance at the Teatro Emeronittio in *La sonnambula* see Bushnell 1980 (1979).

<sup>21</sup> The Teatro Malibran which is not too far from the Teatro La Fenice in Venice, was refurbished in recent years and operas are still performed there. There is a beautiful book on the Teatro Malibran, that gives a listing of all of the performances there over the years (Biggi, Mangini 2001).

what was best for the family. Puzzi's offer was attractive as it meant that he had an immediate opportunity to work when he got to London. So he made up his mind and he, Lina and Louisa would move to London that April 1835. Since they now had some funds, most probably they sailed from Genoa to England towards the end of April, arriving in London sometime in mid-May.

The experience that Balfe gained in Italy greatly influenced his direction as a composer in London and elsewhere in the years ahead. His time in the operatic trenches also gave him a deep understanding of a singer's needs, which would be acknowledged by some of the leading singers who performed in his operas. Within a short period of time after arriving in England in May 1835 his unique talents would dramatically burst forth on the London scene to create a whole new genre of English opera for what would soon become the Victorian age in Britain.

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